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SCIENCE NEWS

# Are Ultra-Processed Foods Fattening? They Are for Company Profits + More

*The Defender's Big Food Newsletter brings you the latest headlines related to industrial food companies and their products, including ultra-processed foods, food additives, contaminants, GMOs and lab-grown meat and their toxic effects on human health. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.*

By The Defender Staff

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## Are Ultra-Processed Foods Fattening? They Are for Company Profits

**The Wall Street Journal reported:**

There is polyglycerol polricinoleate in Hershey bars and tripotassium phosphate in Cheerios breakfast cereal. Growing scrutiny of the peculiar ingredients in popular snack foods might be bad news for their makers.

"Ultra-processed foods" are informally considered those that contain ingredients that aren't normally found in a domestic kitchen — protein isolates or emulsifiers, for example. The term comes from a way of classifying foods, called Nova, which emerged in Brazil over a decade ago.

The evidence is controversial but is being taken seriously, including at the policy level. The U.S. government will give Americans fresh diet advice in 2025 as part of a review that happens once every five years. For the first time, federal researchers and health experts will examine the relationship between ultra-processed foods and the risk of obesity. A scientific report is expected this year.

Big food companies are watching the debate closely. A lot is at stake: Products that fall under Nova's UPF category make up roughly 57% of the average American and British diet and an even greater proportion for children.

## EU Commission Set to Scrap Plan to Halve Pesticide Use After Farmer Protests

**Reuters reported:**

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Tuesday proposed withdrawing the EU's plan to halve the use of pesticides, calling it a "symbol of polarization" as regional farmers protested over rising costs and other factors.

"Our farmers deserve to be listened to," Von der Leyen told the European Parliament.

"I know that they are worried about the future of agriculture and their future as farmers. But they also know that agriculture needs to move to a more sustainable model of production so that their farms remain profitable in the years to come."

European farmers have protested in recent weeks against rising costs, taxes, cheap food imports and constraints due to the EU's drive to fight climate change. European farmers' lobby COPA-COGECA welcomed Von der Leyen's remarks.

## Your Plant-Based Meat Could Soon Have Animal Fat

**The Washington Post reported:**

Plant-based meats — think the Impossible Burger or Quorn "chicken" nuggets — are generally filled with a long list of strange-sounding ingredients: pea protein, potato starch, coconut oil, thickeners and more. Those ingredients have turned off some consumers and sparked concerns about the highly processed nature of the average veggie burger or faux slice of bacon.

But now, a few start-ups are planning on adding one more component to the mix: animal fat. Some companies are growing the fat in laboratories, hoping to combine it with wheat protein and spices to make an extra-porky form of plant-based bacon. Others are pulling animal ingredients from traditional meat production and blending it with plant ingredients to create pieces of shredded steak.

The change could alter the identity of plant-based meats, which have been largely seen as an option for vegans and vegetarians. But proponents see that as a feature: a tasty way to propel plant-based meats away from the small proportion of consumers who don't eat meat and into the mainstream.

Companies also claim that lab-grown fat has advantages over standard muscle tissue grown in the lab. Growing meat remains prohibitively expensive — while most companies do not publicly share their costs, lab-grown or "cultivated" meat is estimated to cost hundreds of dollars per pound. That's largely because the process involves a host of expensive, medical-grade equipment, from bioreactors to the soupy nutrients that are pumped in to feed the growing cells.

## More Than 500 North American Farmers, Manufacturers, Retailers and Shoppers Urge EU to Keep Strong Oversight of GMOs

**Post Online Media reported:**

The European Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety (ENVI) is advancing a proposal to deregulate GMO production in Europe.

There is significant support for the proposal from some ministers and biotechnology developers. The proposal will be put to a plenary vote on February 6.

This is highly concerning to the natural products industry. If the proposal passes, the majority of new GMOs created through powerful technologies like CRISPR could enter the food system untracked, untested, unregulated, and unlabeled.

This is a striking reversal of the E.U.'s longstanding commitment to protecting the global non-GMO food supply. It would undermine shoppers' rights to know what's in their food and to avoid GMOs. The E.U. produces about a fifth of the global food supply.

## Study Links Ultra-Processed Foods to Higher Metabolic Disease Risk

**News Medical reported:**

A recent Frontiers in Nutrition study assesses the association between metabolic diseases and the consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs).

Reducing the consumption of UPFs is typically recommended to prevent the development of metabolic diseases like type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) and obesity. Metabolic diseases adversely affect organs, tissues, or cells and are caused by the decomposition and abnormal synthesis of certain substances during metabolism.

The NOVA food classification system defines UPFs as a class of foods arising from industrial formulations created from extracted substances, additives, and little intact food. Examples of UPFs include cakes, snacks, sausages, and sweetened beverages.

An extensive overview of 13 meta-analyses was performed to evaluate the credibility of relationships between the consumption of UPFs and metabolic disease. To this end, all studies suggested that the consumption of UPFs was associated with the development of obesity and T2DM.

## Why the Farm Bill Isn't Prioritizing the Right Things

**Modern Farmer reported:**

On the surface, the U.S. farm system may seem like a resounding success. Farm income, yields and food availability have all increased tremendously since the inception of the Farm Bill in 1933, in line with its original intent.

But a closer look at our food system reveals many challenges. Its foundation relies on resource-intensive commodity crop production, which has led to degraded soil, water and air and has contributed to climate change. It is heavily dependent on government subsidies, with large-scale farms scooping up more than 90% of subsidies, despite making up only three percent of the farms in the country.

Our food system depends on cheap labor that consists predominantly of migrant workers, of which half are estimated to be undocumented. The societal cost, meaning the hidden costs associated with labor issues not reflected in the market, soil erosion, nutrient loss from fertilizer and animal manure, bacteria from animal manure and pesticides are the largest stressors to the water quality of America's streams and rivers. It's estimated that the undocumented cost of the food system on the environment and biodiversity is nearly $900 billion per year.

## Heartbreaking: Harmful Food Dyes in Valentine's Day Candy

**EWG reported:**

Heart-shaped candies, the ubiquitous Valentine's Day sweet treats, may contain potentially problematic food dyes — likely at levels that are harmful to health.

Many brands and varieties of heart-shaped candy contain Yellow Dye No. 5, Yellow Dye No. 6 and Red Dye No. 40.

These synthetic dyes can all be found in Valentine's Day sweets made by popular brands Frankford Candy, Brach's, Disney and Jelly Belly.

Artificial dyes have been linked to an array of health harms. They can make children vulnerable to behavioral difficulties, including decreased attention, according to a 2021 study by the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment.

## The Link Between Ovarian Cancer and Pesticides Increases Among Female Farmers

**Beyond Pesticides reported:**

A study published in Occupational and Environmental Medicine finds that pesticide exposure, especially during puberty, can play a role in ovarian cancer development among female farmers. Although there are many studies that evaluate the risk for cancers among farmers, very few pieces of literature examine the risk of ovarian cancer from pesticide exposure.

Additionally, this study suggests the role of hormones in ovarian cancer prognosis and development, highlighting an association with endocrine disrupting pesticides. For a past and current-use endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs), like pesticides, has a long history of severe adverse human health effects. Endocrine disruptors are xenobiotics (i.e., chemical substances like toxic pesticides foreign to an organism or ecosystem) present in nearly all organisms or ecosystems.

The World Health Organization (WHO), European Union (EU), and endocrine disruptor expert (deceased) Theo Colborn, Ph.D., classify over 55 to 177 chemical compounds as endocrine disruptors, including various household products like detergents, disinfectants, plastics, and pesticides.

Endocrine disruption can lead to several health problems, including hormone-related cancer development (e.g., thyroid, breast, ovarian, prostate, testicular), reproductive dysfunction, and diabetes/obesity that can span generations. Therefore, studies related to pesticides and endocrine disruption help scientists understand the underlying mechanisms that indirectly or directly cause cancer, among other health issues.

## Kroger Commits to Reduce Toxic Pesticides

**Progressive Grocer reported:**

The Kroger Co. has become the latest major U.S. grocer to reveal commitments aimed at reducing the use of toxic pesticides in its fresh fruit and vegetable supply chain. Since 2018, 13 major U.S. food retailers representing more than $1.4 billion in annual food and beverage sales have instituted policies to reduce toxic pesticides in their supply chains.

Kroger's commitment comes in the wake of similar policies from Whole Foods, which rolled out a pesticide policy in December 2023, as well as Walmart and Giant Eagle.

These industry efforts are the result of a multiyear initiative headed by Friends of the Earth (FOE) and supported by 100-plus environmental, public health, farmer and farmworker organizations across the United States. FOE's Bee-Friendly Retailer Scorecard tracks company progress.

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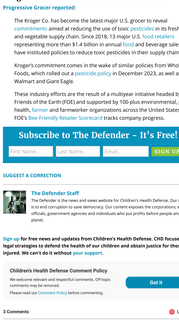
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